

ASSESSMENT IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE LIBRARY

Beth Fuseler Avery

University of North Texas Libraries
1155 Union Circle #305190
Denton, TX 76203

Abstract: As the economy worsens, libraries are increasingly being asked to demonstrate the value they add to their institutional mission. We will discuss ways libraries can use assessment to demonstrate their role in the institution and make services they offer more relevant to their users. Based on current projects in our libraries, we will discuss why we assess, what we assess, easy assessment methods, how to make assessment a part of all we do and making changes to services based on what we find out.

Keywords: Libraries - Evaluation

Many of us have a natural aversion to even the word assessment. We remember that statistics class when there t-tests, chi squared and all those other things we've forgotten about because they aren't part of our everyday life in the library. However, now more and more we are being called on, by administrators and funding bodies, to show that our services are used and respond to the needs of our users. However, remembering that long ago class the task seems daunting. Let's find some ways to make assessment a part of your every day routine in your library.

First, throw out all those memories of numbers and funny symbols. Second, don't say you don't assess what you do. Everyone assesses every day. Every time you look at something you make a judgment about it, even if you aren't aware you are doing it. Why do you pick up one book on a topic rather than another? Perhaps you know something about one of the author and nothing about the other. Usually you'll pick the one you know, if you know it's a good author. Perhaps it's even a more simple reason. You want a book on oceans and the blue book just looks better to your eye. Sometimes it is just that simple.

What are the things you want to know about your library and its services? We want to know what services and collections are being used. We want to know if it is being used is it meeting the users' needs. We want to know how we can improve.

To do that we generally look at our reference services, our collections, and our spaces. We often also ask what our patrons want that they aren't getting from our library.

How Do We Assess?

Generally we assess in several ways. Early on in libraries we started by counting things which are termed the inputs. This could be the amount of money spent on library services or the number of books we add to the collection . The theory behind these counts was that

more was better. The more books you had the better your library. The more staff you have the better the service. The bigger your budget the better your library. But is this necessarily true? What is the number of people who come in to the library is high because you serve the best coffee in the building? Or you have a lot of books because every person who retires has left you your library?

Because of the realization that numbers didn't demonstrate use, we started to count outputs. Outputs document the amount of use our library gets. Among other measures, they include the number of books checked out, the number of hits on the webpage or a database, the number of people attending workshop/instruction sessions. This type of counting also makes some assumptions. If a person checks out a book, it is read. If you look at a webpage or use a database you use the information you get from it. We can't actually know that. Perhaps the book sat on a desk until it was renewed the maximum number of times. Perhaps you got no useful hits from the database, which while this maybe a good thing if you are trying to verify no one else has done the research, usually it means you didn't find what you wanted. Perhaps continuing to get no database hits actually frustrated the user and made them dislike the library!

In an attempt to find out contribution of the library to the organization we Began to look at the outcome of the interaction of the library and the user. ACRL (1998) defines outcomes as "the ways library users are changed as a result of their contact with the library's resources or programs.

Methods Used to Assess

Methods used in assessment fall into two areas, quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative are those that measure quantities and generally use counts of items. You might measure the number of books or journal titles in your collection, or the number of reference questions answered. You might take this a step further and measure the number of books or questions answered per researcher or student. Typical methods to obtain quantitative measures include counts, answers to questionnaires or surveys.

Qualitative measures look at the importance of the library collections and services to its users. Typical methods to obtain qualitative measures include interviews, focus groups, personal reflections, observations.

Everyday Assessment

To become a part of our everyday thinking and routine in busy libraries it must be short and simple, easy to do, fit into the staff routine, and not disturb the patron's reason for their visit.

First it will make gathering quantitative measures easier if you can find ways that it can be automated. Can you generate a report from your library catalog that counts how many items were added? Can you install a simple door counter that you collect data from once a day, or more frequently, to see how many people have been in the library? How can you automatically populate spread sheets with data?

If you think about it you are probably doing lots of qualitative data collection already. Do you have a comment box? What does that tell you about the impact of the library? You already conduct interviews every time you say “Did you find what you need?” – and if you’re not you should be asking that question to everyone who leaves the library and interact with the patron to find out why or why not. You can easily do 200 of these interviews in a year.

You can also conduct mini focus groups while you're having coffee. Just as a question about a service or collection or database with get is started. An easy one would be “Do you know that RSS feeds are available from database x? Or have you seen database y? Or “What other libraries do you use?” and then as why.

With free or inexpensive online surveys, such as Survey Monkey <<http://www.surveymonkey.com/>> or Zoomerang <<http://www.zoomerang.com/>>, it is easy to do surveys and get analysis. But remember that users may be becoming surveyed-out. So if you do survey, kept it short. You can get a lot of information from a short, focused survey. First identify what you want to know about and then develop three to five questions that will get you the information. For example, if you want to know if your workshops/instruction sessions are meeting the needs of your students, you might ask 1) What did you learn that was new; 2) What didn't I have to tell you about?; and 3) What do you want to know more about? Or if you want to know if you should purchase a database your have on trial, you might ask 1) Was the database easy for you to use? 2) Did you find pertinent information? 3) Would this database more useful to you in your research than the databases the library now has?

A very useful site is the Sample Size Calculator by Creative Research Systems (2007-2009). It will help you determine how many people you need to include to get results that represent the study population. It also includes calculators to determine the level of confidence of your

Often libraries will compare themselves to another library or group of libraries. When doing this it is important to compare your library to a library that has the same size population and purpose. Many of the IAMSLIC libraries are specialized enough that you may find this difficult to do.

Final Thoughts

Assessment is good. It can help identify the strengths of your library and identify areas for improvement.

No one form of assessment meets every need. Consider the purpose and the audience for whom you are gathering the information or making the justification.

Assessment must be only part of a cycle that starts with identifying the purpose of your assessment, continues with identifying them methods and tools you will use in your assessment, interpreting the results, determining what to do about what you find, and then

implementing changes. Remember that the change could be to build on your strengths as easily as it could be to improve a service or collection.

We assess because we care about our patrons and their needs and expectations. We also assess because we care about what kinds of service we provide.

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